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KARIKURI: THE EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP OF THE
KARINYA PEOPLE OF GUYANA TO GOLD MINING¹

INTRODUCTION

From 1994 to the present, gold exports have garnered the largest quantity of foreign exchange for the Guyanese economy (Thomas 1998:43), belatedly justifying the early historical epithet “El Dorado.”

The majority of Guyana’s indigenous people today live in the interior gold-bearing regions. While the credit for the first significant “shout” or gold rush in 1879 was claimed by “two Negro gold-diggers working in the gold fields of Cayenne” (Webber 1931:289), historical records document that in the pre-Conquest period, Amerindians mined the metal and worked it into decorative pieces traded over a wide area and worn as bodily ornaments by chiefs or “big” men.

In a recent article on the sector, Guyanese economist Clive Thomas (1998:37) reminded that “Guyana has been a commercial gold producer for just over a century. For most of this period the industry has relied on numerous small operators using traditional and not so efficient production methods.” Amerindians and porkknockers (African Guyanese in the main) make up the majority of this sub-sector. Recovery rates of gold in the sub-sector are reportedly low, about 20 percent, in line with the rudimentary technology of pick axe and shovel, followed by manual battelling (“washing down”) of the gold-bearing sands. In macro-economic terms,

1. In this paper I use the term “Karinya,” which is the word used by the people to refer to themselves, in preference to “Carib,” more commonly found in the literature. Not only is “Karinya” more respectful, but “Carib” is a much over-worked term, better limited to describe the Carib-speaking peoples, of whom the Karinya are one of six surviving in Guyana. The others are the Makushi (9,000), Patamona (6,000), Akawaio (5,000), Arekuna (500), and Waiwai (200).

the returns from small-scale miners are insignificant: “In 1996 this sector declared a total output of about 15,000 ounces of gold, that is four per cent of national output and about seven per cent of Omai’s” [the second largest gold producer in the Americas] (Thomas 1998:41). This figure, how-ever, is widely considered to be an under-reporting of the gold produced since, in spite of official attempts to regulate the industry, gold continues to be illegally traded outside of the formal economy.

While indigenous communities will invariably voice a number of complaints regarding the deleterious effects of the gold mining activities of others (specifically, non-Amerindian Guyanese) on both society and environment in and around their territories, the indigenous complainers will often be found to be miners themselves.

Gold mining holds several attractions: in the first place, it suits the highly individualistic traditional lifestyle: mining off by themselves, Amerindians can work at their own pace, and without coastal, or creole, “boss men.” Gold (or diamond) mining has other advantages. It can easily be combined with subsistence activities: once the cassava crop has been planted, the whole family will happily go off to a “backdam” or mining ground where women and children also dig pits and battel for gold.² There is little need for delayed gratification: the back-breaking work generally garners almost immediate returns, since gold is easily traded for food and other commodities, even in the most remote backdams. Additionally, some Amerindians, like the Karinya of this article, are nomadic, and the peripatetic nature of gold work at the rudimentary level dovetails well with their own innate dislike of staying too long in one place. The following article focuses on the interplay between the Karinya of Guyana’s North West District and the intensifying gold mining activities in their homelands.

THE SETTING

During a month of reconnaissance (August 1997) spent traveling on foot between Matthews Ridge and Baramita, and around the scattered Karinya settlements in the Upper Barama/Barima watershed of North West Guyana, there were plenty of opportunities to converse with my Karinya guides and traveling companions and to listen in on their conversations with each other during long days on the trail and at nights in camp. Most of their conversations were conducted in Karinya, but my companions would switch to English or translate for me if they guessed that I might be inter-

2. Backdam: mining workground, generally located alongside a creek or some other source of water to “wash down” gravel. Battel: pan for separating gold grains or dust from sediment; fabricated from the spur of a cedar tree or from metal.

ested, or if I specifically asked the meaning of a word or sentence.

A number of our destinations were Karinya mining camps: places where the “boring” (random prospecting) had yielded up a “payable” amount of “grains.” The lucky few had struck “a string” (a seam of gold), to which the successful prospectors tried to control access, mostly by inviting their relations to join in with them, so as to limit, at least initially, the inevitable rush of outsiders. Later, I would find that my recollections of those conversations were confirmed by the contents of my notebook: most of the talk circled incessantly around gold mining. Gold mining can be said to be the measure of all things in the Karinya world in the North West District – not only the preoccupation of men but also of women and quite young children, indeed of almost everybody I met in the territory, Karinya and non-Karinya alike.

So that even while the Karinya landscape is being drastically transformed by a large multinational timber company operating in the Karinya heartland since 1991, few of the locals know of or pay much heed to that transformation, a matter that lies outside the scope of this paper. Only a handful of local people (and no Karinya, as far as I could ascertain) have jobs with the timber company, and then only in generalized, non-specialist positions like chainsaw operator, driver, or security personnel.

On the other hand, among the sub-region’s inhabitants, gold fever runs high, fueling the local economy, culture, and society and providing what little overarching structure can be discerned in what is essentially a lawless place, outside the pale of state and Church.

PROSPECTING

Shopkeepers and old hands, people in the know in Matthews Ridge, freely admit that the Karinya are unsurpassed in their uncanny ability to discern likely spots in which to start “boring” or digging a pit, locating “a string.” When asked to explain this phenomenon, the Karinya themselves tend to fall back on allegory: in their accounts, success often follows from paying attention to their dreams. For example, dreams of human feces, *wek*, are pointers to success in mining. Other Karinya explain their success as prospectors in more practical terms. In their accounts, gold will generally occur in specific physical locations – governed by the direction in which a stream runs relative to a mountain for example – and often in association with some characteristic small black rocks, termed “gold shit,” the excrement of gold.

Other old timers drinking in the rum shops of Matthews Ridge sagely point out that the Karinya have to be more attentive to telltale signals in the landscape when they are prospecting for gold. This is because generally, unlike non-Amerindian gold seekers, they often have no “backing” from local shopkeepers nor do they own the now popular metal detectors, so that “no grains”³ translates into no food or liquor at the end of a hard day. These elements then permeated the stories I listened to day in, day out, told around Karinya fires to attentive audiences, the children and women listening closely also: stories which in their combination of supernatural divination, attention to the specific precise anecdotes of former successes, allied with local knowledge of the lay of the land and its secrets, together conspire to lock the Karinya into the relentless pursuit of gold, a pursuit which began in earnest in their territory in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This paper seeks to document how the Karinya were drawn into this pursuit of El Dorado, and over time “to suffer its impact and to become its agents” (Wolf 1982:23).

THE KARINYA POPULATION AND HOMELAND

The administrative region demarcated (on paper) in 1980 and named the Matthews Ridge sub-region within the North West District of Guyana can be described as the Karinya heartland. There are fifteen nucleated Karinya settlements all located west of the Essequibo River, and comprising an estimated total population of 5,785.⁴ This figure, however, does not include an estimated thousand Karinya who live in dispersed scattered camps in the Matthews Ridge/Port Kaituma/Barima River hinterland or backdam. When added to the population of Baramita, the largest Karinya settlement, there are then some 2,300 Karinya in the core homeland area.

Indigenous populations throughout Guyana have increased dramatically in this century, the Karinya providing no exception. The population of two hundred in the Upper Barama River area reported by anthropologist John Gillin in 1931 (Gillin 1936) had increased to 551 by 1971 (Adams 1972) (or 750, if one takes the 1969 figure in the *Report by the Amerindian Lands Commission*). In 1997, 484 persons over the age of fourteen years old had been officially registered by the Elections Commission agents in Baramita,

3. 24 grains = 1 pennyweight (dwt.); 20 pennyweight = 1 troy ounce.

4. Baramita 1,300 people, Kwabanna 588, Waikrebi 102, Kokerite 60, Chinese Landing 54, Kariako 334, Red Hill 239, Koriabo, Barima River 262; St Monica 530, Karawab and Mango Landing 365, Akawini 454, Manawarin 1,000; Kurutuku 270, Batavia 207. Some of these villages are “mixed,” which means that other Amerindian population also live there, the result of past missionization.

and it is from that base that I estimate 1,300 persons for that reservation, extrapolating from the high percentage of young children and babies. Unfortunately, neither the resident Community Health Worker, the Malaria Eradication Programme personnel nor the District Development Officer kept records of any kind.

With the exception of the Cuyuni River area, whose upper regions were traversed and known to the Spanish and Dutch in the Dutch colonial period (1616-1803), the larger area bounded by the Upper Cuyuni and Barima Rivers and now called the Matthews Ridge sub-region has historically not been well documented. There are a few extant accounts of journeys made overland between the Upper Barama and Cuyuni – notably Schomburgk's in 1841 (Schomburgk 1923) and the Blair/Campbell/Holmes expedition to the Tupuquen gold diggings in 1857 – but in these mention of the Karinya is generally only of those whom the expedition happened to meet with, rather than any account of the numbers of settlements and/or inhabitants of the general area (Campbell 1883; Holmes 1857-58; Blair 1980).

The Spanish considered the Karinya homeland as preeminently within their domain. However, as the historical records document, it was a claim that was generally resisted by the Karinya themselves, who countered by seeking alliances with the Essequibo Dutch instead. In this contested area, given the battles which were waged on all sides – by the Capuchin Fathers for Karinya souls, to be contained in the growing numbers of missions (Whitehead 1988:202; Butt Colson 1994-96), by the Spanish in their attempts to dislodge the Dutch, and later English, interlopers – it was no wonder that Karinya communities would retreat into the more inaccessible parts of their territory, away from the major rivers, even while Karinya warriors would seek out alliances with the Dutch on the one hand, and the capture of Amerindian slaves on the other, who could then be exchanged for coveted European manufactured goods (Thompson 1987).

Another reason for Karinya elusiveness was simply that their numbers had fallen drastically by the mid-nineteenth century, as was realized even at the time. In his account of the overland journey from the Barama to the Cuyuni in 1857, Daniel Blair (1980:26) ruminated:

The path over which we are now traveling appears to have been well peopled in Schomburgk's time. He describes one village as having 72 inhabitants in 1841 – Now we find only these small settlements along its whole course and the ruins of two – What has become of these people? ... The people here say they are all dead, many in the natural course of time must be, but where are their survivors?

The answer, according to anthropologist Neil Whitehead (1988:28), was

decimation through exposure to Old World diseases. His book argues “that it was the concentration of Amerindian populations, under missionary control, that created the conditions favourable to the establishment of persistent and widespread epidemic diseases,” so that the populations which had survived the first few hundred years of European penetration of their territory (1494-1750s) would succumb rapidly to European diseases only after they had allowed themselves to be missionized. Many of the survivors – on both the Spanish and Dutch sides – retreated into the heartland, venturing out on either side of the political border from time to time, as still holds true today.

At the same time, while their territorial heartland might have been relatively little known, the Karinya themselves had not been obscure or insignificant to the Dutch, whose dependency on these allies has been chronicled by major historians of the period. Karinya chiefs journeyed to Dutch postholders or forts, not the other way round, not surprising given the unfamiliar terrain and the fact that the Dutch were few in number. In their dealings with the Karinya, as with other indigenous peoples, the Dutch did not interfere in the internal affairs of local allies. The Karinya were key allies, in holding the line against Spanish incursions from the Cuyuni in particular, in providing trade goods, especially Amerindian slaves, and in a later period, in policing the territory against runaway African slaves. The Karinya also guarded jealously their privileged trading contacts with the Essequibo Dutch, waging war against other Amerindian peoples like the Akawaio and Manoa who sought to by-pass their self-assigned intermediary role and deal directly with the Dutch. In any event, as historical analyses have borne out (Thompson 1987; Whitehead 1988), steep demographic decline and a shift to plantation agriculture on the coastal regions had contributed to a “general collapse of Amerindian societies in the 18th century” (Whitehead 1988:54), Karinya decline being the most dramatic among the known Amerindian nations.

Ignorance of the Karinya heartland largely continued during the British period. The missionary thrust by both the Anglicans and Catholics after the 1840s, and particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, largely centered on the Morawhanna-Mabaruma axis and radiating centers accessible on the major rivers of the North West. By 1912, the Jesuit Father Cooksey (1912:327) would admit how tenuous was the connection with the area by Church and state:

The immense area, larger than that of the ancient colony and County of Demerara, of the North Western District of the County of Essequibo makes it difficult for one man to write with any amount of intimate knowledge of the Aboriginal inhabitants, of five different races spread in isolated settlements all over 8000 square miles of hill and flood and forest ... The Indians of the

North Western District are of both classes. The Akawois and true Caribs of the southern hill country to the Cuyuni watershed, which forms about two-thirds of our area, are out of contact, except of a very passing nature, with missionary or protector or doctor; and civilisation comes to them disguised as the gold-digger and the balata-bleeder and the gold-fields' grocery and its clerks.

KARIKURI AND THE KARINYA

In pre-Colombian times, gold and jewels, especially jade pendants, were the most important items traded out of the highlands of western Guiana to coastal and Caribbean island peoples. One school of thought is that the coastal Amerindians, including the Karinya, were principally intermediaries in this trade (Boomert 1987:38-39; Benjamin 1988:9), rather than gold workers themselves, a view disputed by Whitehead (1990, 1997) who argues for "a native metallurgical tradition in Guiana" (Whitehead 1997:75). Whatever their provenance, luxury items like the ornaments made out of a gold-copper alloy called *karikuri* and green stone pendants were part of a network of "ceremonial exchange" (Boomert 1987:38), which went hand in hand with the exchanges of more utilitarian goods. No doubt following from the sustained European obsession for the raw metal, the term *karikuri* was extended by speakers of both Cariban and Arawak languages to denote the metal in its mineral state also.⁵

From the time of the first landfall on the South American mainland by Columbus in 1494, the quest for indigenous stocks of gold or indigenous knowledge of auriferous areas were the defining features of European interaction with the region's indigenous peoples. The conjuncture of forces that led to a persistent European presence in Guiana, from the time of the expeditions of Antonio de Berrio around the 1580s to locate El Dorado east of the Orinoco, range from the geopolitical to the mercenary. In the first two-thirds of the sixteenth century the reality of the pearls in the Cumaná region and the gold of the Inca had been far more enticing than the possibility of finding "El Dorado" among the "cannibals" of the Orinoco. Into this space, Spain's rivals found some room for maneuver, needing bases from which to launch attacks on Spanish treasure fleets and to establish their own colonies.

5. The *Karaibs-Nederlands woordenboek* glosses karukuri [Oost- and West-Surinaams Karaibs and West-Surinaams Karaibs] [T(iri)jo kara'kuri, W(ajana) karakuri, Ap(arai) karakuri, Ak(awajo) korokori, Pm karukuri, W(ayampi) karakuri, A(rowaks) karokuri] /znw/ goudkleurigheid [zoals bij zonsopgang] (Courtz 1997:48).

Incidentally, Venezuelan historians tend to focus on the 1570-1605 period as being crucial for Spain's (later Venezuela's) loss of Guiana. Angela Lemmo (1986:18) noted that over two hundred English corsair vessels prowled the circum-Caribbean area in this epoch, paralyzing the Araya salt trade and the Margarita pearling industry, as well as preying on Spanish treasure fleets. Piracy in her words "became as endemic as disease."

The search for new supplies of gold, disguised by the northern Europeans as nationalist challenges to Spain's economic and geopolitical hegemony in Europe and the Americas, was arguably the motor force behind this latest phase of European restiveness. At the same time that Spanish sovereignty was being contested by privateers and pirates throughout the sixteenth century, Guiana had become a synonym for gold. Raleigh (1893:14) would describe Guiana as "the magazine of all rich metals" and by the 1580s, the territory had come to be viewed as the last frontier, a no man's land between the Orinoco and Brazil and as a result available to other Europeans (Lemmo 1986:11-12).

The Dutch period (1616-1803) was not marked by any significant gold finds, not for want of trying. Some historians have argued that Amerindian leaders had learned to be duplicitous, having observed the consequences which followed from revealing the location of any such deposits to gold-hungry Europeans. On the other hand, alluvial gold deposits were not easy to locate, as is still true in the present. One account reconstructed by Burr from the reports of the Governor of Suriname to the Society of Suriname between 1707 and 1712 was labelled "Documents relating to a Secret Expedition from Suriname to the Orinoco in search of a certain Treasure." The complex intrigue involved a Carib chief, Tawaimara, various Arawak "Owls" [chiefs], rivalry between the Suriname and Essequibo colonies, etc. In a series of evasive answers as to why the mineral was never forthcoming (after the initial sample had whetted Dutch appetites), the Carib chief continued to plead that he had gotten into trouble "with several other chiefs who dwell not far from him, because he had disclosed [knowledge of the gold] to the whites" (United States Commission 1897:216).

Traveling in the North West District of Guyana, 150 years later, Daniel Blair (1980:17) would note the continuing Karinya reaction to the European obsession with the metal: "we have been informed here that the Carabisce on the Cuyuni having heard of the Venezuelans 'digging money' have abandoned their settlements and retired deeper into the country fearing imprisonment."

Of course, the early discoveries of gold in the North West District provided the British with a major impetus to settle the border with Venezuela and they buttressed their claim by citing the long-standing alliance and

friendship of the region's indigenous peoples, that had begun with their predecessors, the Dutch. The strength of the gold lobby would increase in 1884 when a prospector hit "pay dirt" on the Essequibo; among other locations, gold was discovered in the headwaters of the Barama and Barima Rivers. A slump in world prices for sugar in the 1880s certainly contributed to the ensuing gold boom, which initially was concentrated in the Essequibo River and its tributaries, but soon encompassed all areas of the colony, the Berbice and Corentyne Rivers excepting.⁶ Official records of gold production in Guyana began in that same year, 1884, with the export of 250 ounces. The gold production recorded in the 1884-1914 period would remain unrivalled for another century.

During the peak years – from 1884 to the turn of the century – gold production increased from 6,518 ounces in 1886 to 134,124 ounces in 1892, and indeed during a six-year period (1884-1900), over one and a quarter million ounces of gold were produced. By the turn of the century, gold exports made up 22 per cent of colonial exports,⁷ a meteoric rise comparable to the parallel rise in importance of gold exports to the Guyana economy a century later.⁸ In this record-breaking early period, yields continued to be over the 100,000 ounce level until 1903-4 when 90,336 ounces were declared. By 1913-14, the decline in production had set in, with 82,706 ounces declared. During these three decades (1884-1914) production of the metal was almost entirely due to the placer workings of accessible finds, usually first by a registered joint stock company, and subsequently by the independent-minded porkknockers in and around those finds. In spite of official support and encouragement in that period for what was called quartz mining – involving blasting the gold-bearing reefs, then crushing the rock, adding water and separating the gold from the slurry by using mercury, most of the gold extracted was a result of placer mining.

However, given the rudimentary technology that was in use, it was inevitable that once the early lucky strikes were worked out, gold production would decline. At the same time, once sugar had recovered from the slump of the 1880s, the plantocracy would no longer be disposed to encourage interior resource development which had proved to be much more alluring to the laboring class on whom sugar production depended. While the lure of gold continued to exert its hold on the popular imagination and while porkknockers and a few companies continued to work

6. For example, in 1912 the gold workings at Omai on the Essequibo River recorded a production of 27,123 ounces while at Tassiwini on the Barama River, gross production was 10,178 ounces.

7. The highest annual production was of 139,000 ounces of gold in 1894.

8. In 1993, though, the lion's share of the combined returns from local and foreign miners came from the multinational, Omai Gold Mines Limited (OGML).

claims throughout the twentieth century, it was not until the 1985-90 period that the industry would regain significance to the Guyanese economy.⁹

It is against this backdrop that the impact of mining on the Karinya has to be evaluated. There were two major changes: first, the influx of porkknockers and secondly, increased accessibility to the gold fields, by river initially and later by air and internal roads and even a railway. While there are no records, then or now, of mining workers in particular districts, every year from 1890 to 1895, more than 15,000 men registered as gold workers (Perkins 1896:39). This wave of recruits to the dream of El Dorado traveled in small launches up the Barama River during the rainy season, as far as the Towakaima Falls, whence the Barima-Barama trail passed through the Mazawini and Takutu gold fields to Arakaka on the Barima River.

In the dry season, even today, the Barima River gives access to the principal gold-bearing areas of the North West District since it is navigable for the greater part of the year. Launches used to ascend the river regularly to Arakaka, the center of the gold-bearing district, where a mining warden was stationed. Smaller gold-digging settlements were found on the right bank of the Barima River, the furthest being "Five Stars" landing. This site, now called "Five Star," is about 170 miles from Morawhanna by river and 30 miles from Arakaka by land over the "Five Stars Trail" constructed and maintained by the government. Small settlements mushroomed along the route, bearing such optimistic names as Better Hope, Charity, Land of Promise, and Enterprise. New shops opened, ending centuries of isolation: the outside world had arrived right at the doorstep of the Karinya.

The impact of these momentous changes on the Karinya was not positive. As early as 1915, Charles Wellington Furlong (1915:536) would conclude: "here – in the forest – amidst the superabundance of life, where nature wars against herself, the Carib thrives in spite of everything, except contact with civilization." The Karinya response to this latest wave of intruders was, at first, withdrawal: "As prospectors, local and foreign, moved into the district, the Amerindians withdrew and sought refuge in the most remote parts of the forest that they could find" (Amerindian Lands Commission 1969:200). In time they learned to mine gold themselves, to provide services of various kinds to the burgeoning industry, and to make

9. In 1993, local gold miners declared 87,094 ounces, worth about G\$3.71 billion to the Guyana Gold Board which were sold for G\$4,087 million. Royalty paid to the GGMC amounted to G\$184.7 million while the Inland Revenue Department was paid G\$57.8 million in taxes. The G\$57.8 million covered the 2 percent tax paid by local miners and does not include corporate taxes nor the 10 percent deduction by miners for their workers. Porkknockers are in the minority today, superseded by capital intensive mining operations that employ mining workers.

way for new residents and “landings” (area of service facilities and some infrastructure). Yet, with the passage of time, Furlong’s pessimistic assessment of the impact of this latest invasion on the Karinya continued to ring true.

The sections relating to the Karinya as viewed in 1945 and contained in the Report of the Amerindian Welfare Officer, P. Storer Peberdy (1948:19-20), bear quoting yet again:

The Upper Barama River Caribs are the most impoverished and traumatic aboriginal group that I have encountered throughout the length and breadth of British Guiana. They are settled in areas which produced in the early days of mining exploration the largest gold deposits in the Colony above the Fraser Falls of the Barama River and in the Five Star District on the Barima. Miners of practically all nationalities have pioneered these goldfields. Their progeny have been left behind and provide the answer to those who contend that protection laws should be abolished and that haphazard miscegenation is the fitting answer to infuse “new blood” into Aboriginal tribes.

They have been and still are completely unadministered. Medical services and [sic] below the falls, although medical supplies of a limited nature can be obtained from shopkeepers. They have [been] and are labouring as carriers and labourers in mining camps. Their arts and crafts to all intents and purposes have vanished. From information obtained the Carib population in this area was reputed to be over twenty-five hundred strong just over fifty years ago. There are no facts known to the writer to support this contention but from the morbid condition of these contemporary “Carib” groups such a rapid decline in population numbers is understandable. Colonel Moorhead, Commissioner of Lands and Mines, who recently walked the Five Star-Baramita trail commented on the physical condition of the carriers and stated that they could not continue to carry the loads they do and live. The answer is they do not live; they merely exist.

Peberdy recommended a medical survey of the area, and the ensuing work of Government Medical Officers like Eddey, Charles, and Giglioli, in countering the spread of malaria, allowed the Karinya population to rally. Indeed their numbers increased progressively thereafter (Forte 1990).

Gold production in the Upper Barama area between the time of Peberdy and the late 1960s, while lower, continued to be significant to the national total.¹⁰ In other words, gold production had not been transient in the territory. While the early highs had not been maintained, production on a fairly sustained level had continued in Karinya territory. It was not surpris-

10. Wellesley A. Baird was the largest miner. In 1949, the total gold production in British Guiana was 21,098 ounces, of that amount 2,611 ounces were produced by Baird, Phang and Dragten. In 1953, Baird and Dragten produced 790 ounces out of a Guiana total of 20,966 ounces (Colonial Office 1950:58-59 and 1955:80). In 1959, gold production dropped to 3,448 ounces and to 1,702 ounces in 1961 (Colonial Office 1960:98 and 1963:117; see also Adams 1982:174-75).

ing then that the ramifications of gold mining would be far-reaching for the Karinya. Of the Upper Barama Caribs, the 1969 *Report by the Amerindian Lands Commission* (1969:200-201) noted:

The area is seldom visited by members of the administrative or medical officers from Mabaruma ... Apart from some small communities between Baramita and Towakaima, and the one centered on Old World Mine, the people live in single family units in the most remote corners of the forest. They are for the most part unclothed and extremely timid. Rev. Traugh claimed that he has been unable to make contact with them as they withdrew into the bush on his approach and remained there until his departure ... The Commission visited one family at Aronka, four miles from the airstrip, where a man, his five wives, 25 children and 64 immediate relatives were living as one community.

What strikes me most about the Commission's observation is that a mere four miles in distance separates the world of airstrip and Wesleyan outpost on the one hand and an almost pre-Columbian Karinya world on the other. Today, thirty years later, the separation remains as marked.

Following independence in 1966, the era of declining gold production in the Karinya territory also witnessed the closure of a relatively short-lived manganese mining operation (1960-68), centered on the new townships of Matthews Ridge and Port Kaituma. The operation began in 1954, when the African Manganese Company, a subsidiary of Union Carbide, floated a subsidiary, the North West Guiana Mining Company, later to become Manganese Mines Management Limited. This company bought over the rights of the Barima Gold Mining Company's Exclusive Permission and applied for long-term leases. Its closure in 1968 was due to the large fall in the price of manganese, though local people continue to blame the Guyana government, alleging that the company responded to labor agitation and rumors of impending nationalization. It had mined at Matthews Ridge for eight years, after three years of construction. Between 1960 and 1969 about eight hundred tons of manganese concentrate were produced daily.

The decaying infrastructure in the Matthews Ridge area bears testimony to the considerable investment of the company. A 3' 10" gauge railway of about thirty English miles length was built, running north-east from Matthews Ridge, across the Barima Bridge and on to Port Kaituma. Thence the stockpiled ore was carried by sea-going ships of 15' laden draft down the dredged Kaituma Canal and River to the sea. It is fifty-seven nautical miles from Port Kaituma to the Waini Mouth and a further 212 nautical miles to Chaguaramas in Trinidad where Union Carbide kept its stockpile. The railway continued to serve the Matthews Ridge community until recent years when prospectors removed sections of the rails, and finally the

Barama Company Limited completed the dismantling process (Forte & Melville 1989:203).

From local accounts, it seems that while the township center of Matthews Ridge was not a Karinya site, the area was well known and used for hunting and fishing. After the manganese operation began, many Karinya migrated to the area, as did other Guyanese – Amerindians and non-Amerindians – some out of curiosity no doubt, and others attracted by the prospect of steady, well-paid jobs. The company built a township in the jungle-houses for its employees, streets and street lighting, piped water from the nearby Pakera Lake, twenty-four-hour electricity, roads leading to the airstrip, etc. With the economic and social deterioration that have marked the post-1968 period in Guyana, locals wax almost nostalgic when they recall the golden era “in company time.”

The company also controlled access to its township, by means of a pass system. Coastal Guyanese could only get on to the boat or aeroplane destined for “the Ridge” if they had acquired a pass – limited to a specified time period, usually three weeks. Married workers were required to produce their marriage certificates before access was granted to their wives. Of course the entire vast area was tacitly acknowledged to be indigenous territory, so that Amerindians who walked in and out were exempted from the security checks. At the same time, only a very few of the Karinya did get jobs with the company, and in general these were limited to manual jobs. Today these Karinya are described as “Englishified” by the majority whose contact with the manganese operation was slight. In fact, most job openings went to coastlander Guyanese, laying the foundation for the preponderantly African Guyanese population of the major nucleated settlements of Matthews Ridge and Port Kaituma.

Mining first, and forestry later, were responsible for the major transformations wrought in the Karinya homeland in the twentieth century. The representatives of Church and state also made their appearance, though intermittently and confined in the main to the nucleated centers of Matthews Ridge, Port Kaituma, and Baramita. Only the latter can be described as a Karinya settlement, and even the limited state presence evident in the other two centers, where outsiders form the majority population, is less here. In the case of Matthews Ridge and Port Kaituma, the existing infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and churches, caters primarily to a non-Karinya population.

The Karinya, concentrated in Baramita and in a network of shifting forest settlements and mining camps, are hardly aware of rights to any of these facilities. Transactions with the dominant society are through the medium of English, and on terms generally set from outside. There was no primary

school in Baramita from 1982 to 1995. However there is a police outpost, a District Development Officer (since 1969), Malaria or Vector Control Unit personnel, and a Community Health Worker (CHW). The few official buildings – school, police and health station – are situated on the perimeter of the airstrip, set apart by at least half a mile from the nearest Karinya households. In 1997 the CHW had no records of population, births, deaths, patients, illnesses treated, etc. – partly on account of lack of record books, partly because no one from Head Office ever had required any reports from him. He received supplies only intermittently from the Health Ministry and lacked any established means of communication with his superiors.

In point of fact, then, the Karinya in this sub-region – both in the nucleated populous center of Baramita and in the scattered mining and other camps – have had minimal contact with state or Church. With respect to the latter, this is changing with the advent in Baramita of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses Church, which began with the mass conversion of the dominant clan, the half Afro-Guyanese, half Karinya Baird family in 1990.¹¹ With only a few exceptions, none of the Karinya I met during the course of a month of walking knew his/her date of birth or present age, had ever been immunized or attended a school. No one in authority interviewed in Matthews Ridge or Baramita over the course of a month knew the population of the sub-region, or why there was no mention of Baramita in the 1991 national decennial census.¹² Following from this there seemed to be no morbidity or mortality figures, not surprising given the shortage of CHWs in the health system.

The principal, if not only, function ascribed to the state by the majority of Karinya today is a punitive one. The government is characterized by these Guyanese as coastlander police, and occasionally itinerant mining wardens and visiting magistrates. Since 1995 the resumption of DDT spraying by the Ministry of Health has increased the number of semi-official personnel. But in the scattered settlements and mining camps Karinya assert that they have never been visited by health or education personnel or by any other representatives of the state. This situation might

11. On the Sunday that I attended the service in Baramita, the congregation numbered 378 persons, excluding children and babies, practically all of the adults within a considerable radius. The population of Baramita is highly dispersed along six major tributaries of the Barama River.

Wellesley A. Baird, the founder of the Baird family, was an African Guyanese who had twelve children with a Karinya woman. All of his sons have married Karinya wives, and at least one of the daughters whom I met has an Arawak husband. Wellesley Baird was the first District Development Officer and the immediate predecessor of his son the incumbent Samuel Baird, whose first language is Karinya and who also speaks fluent English.

12. Interviewed were officials of the Neighbourhood Democratic Council in Matthews Ridge and the District Development Officer in Baramita.

have been unremarkable had this territory been left to its own devices. On the contrary, the exploitation of the world's dwindling sources of natural capital would arrive in full force in the Karinya heartland in the 1990s.

Today, multinational timber and mining companies hold various state permits to extract timber, build forest roads, carry out mining reconnaissance flights, and to prospect and mine gold in the ground. No Karinya, nor indeed local officials, are aware of the nature of the permits nor of what lies in store for them in the short, medium, or long term.¹³ The Karinya, for their part, carry on as best they can. Many Karinya have moved back to the Baramita area, which is legally protected by its reservation status.

As for contact with the state, the situation only changed with the intensive voter registration exercise carried out in 1996-97, which created much excitement among the Karinya. Many people I met in August 1997 were anxiously awaiting the first documentation of their existence, Voter ID cards. I did not tell anyone that the cards had to be given up at the time of voting.

KARINYA'S CURRENT INVOLVEMENT IN GOLD MINING

The final section of my paper summarizes the present-day relationship of the Karinya to gold mining in the North West. This account will be limited to active Karinya involvement in small-scale mining, largely excluding the impact on them of operations of the multinational exploration and mining companies.

Beginning in the 1980s, the Guiana Shield has attracted large numbers of mineral prospecting companies, many of which have operations, or shareholding stakes, in a number of countries. The Karinya, like other indigenous peoples to the south – the Akawaio, Arekuna, Patamona, Makushi, and Wapishana – bear witness to the most recent phase of invasion of their territory in Guyana, Venezuela, and Brazil. Their own responses have been multi-faceted: some have found jobs with multinational or other outsider outfits; many, infected by mining fever, prospect on their own; while others, particularly the Brazilian Makushi, are actively engaged in protesting the invasion, and the effects of mining on the geographical and social landscape.

The Karinya are deeply involved in mining on both sides of the border, which on the Venezuelan side is centered in the Imataka mountain area. Many of the Karinya I met had relatives on the Venezuelan side. Young men in particular make the journey, though entire families move back and

13. I heard, for example, many stories of the depredations wrought on the landscape by the road building activities which ignore Karinya farms and drinking water sources, but that lies outside the scope of this paper.

forth. I met a number of these families in Baramita, who had moved back after hearing of the opening of a grand Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses Church. The young adults and children of these families spoke only Karinya and some Spanish, no English. Interestingly, many Karinya in all parts of the sub-region, both young and old, speak only Karinya, a reflection of how tangential their connection is with the larger nation state, Guyanese or Venezuelan.

According to the Karinya, whether documented or not, they encounter few problems with the Venezuelan border authorities, provided they look like "pure" indigenes. However, anyone with a hint of negroid blood, manifested by dark skin or a lack of "straight hair," for example, is apt to be turned back at the first outpost. The Karinya describe the Venezuelan "police" as cruel, dispensing blows at the slightest whim, and antipathetic to black people in particular.

The Karinya measure the distance to Imataka by the number of days it takes them to get there. From Matthews Ridge, for example, you use the Whanna "line" or trail to get to the Venezuelan side in three days: through Powisparu to the Barima River, crossing the Takutu, Urapandai, Big Creek, Kawana, Powisparu, and Turtle Creeks to the Barima River. From there, through Cedar and Sand Creek to La Loca, on the Guyana side. At that point, one climbs the hill which marks the boundary between Venezuela and Guyana, traveling a further six miles to Imataka, Pretamo, and Bochinche at Road End. From there one can hitch a ride to Tumeremo, another site of gold activity. Population-wise, "it is sheer Karinya all the way," which means that you can do your journey in stages, carrying your few possessions and able to depend on Karinya hospitality to fellow Karinya.

In Venezuela, the Guyanese Karinya work for Venezuelan bosses as paid mining workers. From all accounts, Venezuelan Karinya "talk on their behalf," that is, put in a good word for their Guyanese kinsmen who arrive looking for jobs. In addition, the bosses are reputed to like Karinya workmen who are willing and need no training.

A number of Karinya I met also hunt – particularly alligators and turtles – in what they know is Venezuelan territory. At the same time, many told me that there is an undercurrent of resentment of Karinya families who have returned from Venezuela – generally possessing more consumer goods, tape player, track “boots,” etc. Predictably these tensions simmer below the surface and are only made manifest at the traditional drunken sprees, which take place frequently even though the Jehovah Witnesses Church frowns on them. During the period I spent at Baramita, a woman’s arm was badly broken at a spree. She and her family had returned from Venezuela some months before and her son with his flashy clothes and collection of Spanish “dance hall” tapes, had struck up a liaison with a local girl. As his rivals attempted to beat him during the spree, his mother intervened and was badly injured.

Perhaps it is the continued existence of “sheer Karinya all the way,” the very preponderance of this ethnicity in what is increasingly an invaded area, which explains why in fundamental ways the Karinya have withstood the turbulence unleashed on their homeland and themselves by a century of mining activity. This statement will take some explaining since, on the surface, the casual observer today will react with much the same shock and horror as Peberdy did in 1945-46 when confronted with what passes for a settlement in the Karinya area.

What is most striking is the comparison, in which the Karinya come out badly, with the overwhelming majority of other Guyanese Amerindian settlements. In no Karinya settlement in this sub-region, Baramita excepting, did I ever meet a local acknowledged leader. There is simply no local structure of governance. People came together frequently, generally at sundown, at whatever shack passes for a local shop, there to exchange their “grains” for high wine principally, cigarettes, cocaine perhaps, and much later some basic food items. The shopkeepers everywhere and the itinerant sellers of high wine tell the same tale: the evening begins well, men, women (and children in many instances) drinking, smoking, and socializing together. An hour or two later, insults are traded, old grievances recalled, and invariably a fight ensues. The number of fatalities, unrecorded anywhere officially, is clearly high.

There is, at first glance, social degradation and break-down on all sides: pervasive alcoholism, and now increasing evidence of drug abuse, non-stable conjugal unions and widespread neglect of parental responsibilities, neglect of traditional arts and crafts and subsistence agriculture, in a seemingly single-minded pursuit of mining. Yet, as anthropologists increasingly document, there is a resilience to social structure and organization even in the midst of profound upheavals. As the leading anthropologist of Carib societies, Peter Rivière (1984:8), has perceptively noted, while material

cultural elements are “most prone to change, abandonment, and substitution ... this is in marked contrast with the ability of these groups to retain their social structures through the most adverse conditions. This supports the view that what is fundamental and invariant is the social structure.” So it is with the Karinya.

To spend time with the gold mining Karinya is to enter a different world. There, when people talk about “gold price drop,” they do have an awareness that its value is set far outside of Guyana, even if they may never have heard the words “gold standard” or “stock exchange.”

Yet they remain an intact forest people, able to survive off the forest through their intimate knowledge of its flora and fauna. It is precisely this close relationship to the environment which makes them such valued gold prospectors, to outsider outfits and to the shopkeepers who in turn back these outfits. The Karinya, from all accounts, are unsurpassed when it comes to locating a “shout.” They do not succeed in keeping its location secret for long since they invariably need to exchange their pickings for drink and food. The shopkeepers and owners of metal detectors and portable pumps then make their way in and “buy a share” in the operation, or set up a parallel, more high-tech operation. Either way, the Karinya move out, characteristically uncomfortable among coastlanders. They will return home until their money runs out, or start prospecting elsewhere. This is the pattern that holds in the Matthews Ridge sub-region.

The shifting nature of gold prospecting and working has fitted in well with the peripatetic habits of the Karinya. While the majority have taken to mining enthusiastically, most continue to plant their bitter cassava. Karinya recount instances of miners who had neglected their farms and were forced to purchase cassava bread. But people generally had learned that mining was still a hit or miss thing, in spite of the fabled Karinya hunches. “Nothing showing,” at the end of a day of hard work digging and battelling, means that the Karinya had better have a farm to fall back on.

There are few permanent tree crops in Karinya homesteads, even in the Baramita area. People cultivate bitter cassava almost exclusively, even while they will tell you of the good prices which can be obtained for peanuts, or eddoes, in the backdam.

Settlements are uprooted every few years and people think nothing of moving camp with little notice. It is this restlessness which perhaps accounts for the transient atmosphere of the average Karinya homestead, and the ease with which families move back and forth between old farm and new home, even when the distance involves a hard day or two of trekking.

The Karinya neither adorn themselves with gold nor value the metal intrinsically. Nevertheless, for many, life revolves around the acquisition of gold, and in its pursuit they spend every daylight hour, manually digging pits and then washing gravel in the hope that “the grains will show.” Coastlanders in Matthews Ridge and elsewhere tell stories, which the Karinya corroborate, of the pounds and pounds of gold which have been mined over the years by Karinya. Yet there are no material signs of that wealth in any Karinya camp or settlement. Karinya make statements like “We Karinya people built up Millie [a shopkeeper in Matthews Ridge] and Egbert” [her brother who has shops in Five Stars and the Ridge]. Millie, in turn, (as do other shopkeepers) describes the Karinya as “her Buck people,”¹⁴ who can be depended on to exchange their grains for the wherewithal to have a good time: high wine, cigarettes, and loud music blaring from the tape player. Later, when everyone is drunk, they will sleep the drink off, lying on the stone floor of the shop. The following day(s), if any money remains, a few basic items will be purchased – salt, soap, and matches – before heading back to the bush.

These days, the Karinya do not have to trek to the “landing” for supplies. There are a number of persons, both men and women, who regularly ply the backdams, wherever a shout is on, to exchange high wine, cigarettes, cooked food, clothing, etc. for grains. Items “droghed”¹⁵ into the backdam are higher in cost than equivalent goods at the “landing,” but as long as the “grains” are “showing,” the Karinya exchange them as fast as they come for consumer items, alcohol, and food. In addition, since the Karinya are mostly illiterate and innumerate, many unscrupulous traders take advantage of them: the prices go up as soon as the seller knows that the Karinya has “grains” on his person.

A number of observers assert that the Karinya have more intrinsic respect for currency than they do for gold, keeping paper money close to their persons while the “kiddy” or small plastic container in which they keep their “grains” might be left carelessly lying around. While I was not around the Karinya for long enough to corroborate or discount that story, it might well be because paper money is seldom seen in a context where value is measured in gold grains.

In August 1997, loads “droghed” into the backdam fetched the following prices: 1 cake arepa (cassava bread): 1 grain; sweet cassava: 2 grains/lb;

14. Buck: term originally applied by the Dutch (“bok”?) to any indigenous person; now a derogatory term used by coastlanders both to address Amerindians (“Buckman”) and to refer to them.

15. Drogh: to carry loads for others on foot, generally in a *warishi*, an Amerindian backpack suspended mostly from the forehead.

wild meat: 3 grains/lb; cigarettes: 2 grains per pack. With ingenuity the Karinya fabricate gold scales and weights of varying sizes, out of the detritus of consumer society: the empty cans of Polar, a Venezuelan beer, the Polar top pull ring, red plastic seals from the tops of torch batteries, bits of discarded aluminum, old Guyana coins, broken into halves. Shopkeepers and gold purchasers confirm that when a Karinya brings his small packet of grains to exchange at the end of a day, he or she knows beforehand the exact measure of grains because their home-made scales are as accurate as the Guyana Gold Board's.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested above that there is an invariant Karinya core which has been unaffected by the wholesale embrace of mining culture and the increasing contact with outsiders.¹⁶ On the Guyana side, the Karinya continue to mine in the interstices of their territory, side by side with multinationals, Brazilian entrepreneurs, individual porkknockers, and local operations of varied size. Their relationships with outsiders go back to the early Contact period and, from the beginning, persistently circled around the existence of gold. As the Karinya lost their early autonomy, their relationships with the outside world grew increasingly unequal, intensifying in the twentieth century with the growth in resource extractive operations in their homeland. In these encounters the Karinya have fared badly, lacking the social organization and leadership that might have allowed them to create some space for themselves.

The end result is that the Karinya are accorded the lowest social status among the indigenous groups of the territory (the others being Arawak and Warau), and that collectively the indigenous peoples remain marginalized in a homeland in which they still form the numerical majority. At the same time, the Karinya, individually and not as an organized group, are increasingly seeking incorporation into this larger world, principally through offering their labor power directly, or the gold they mine themselves, to meet their needs for consumer goods. The pace of change has

16. Martina Grimmig, a German researcher, has observed similarities with the situation of the Karinya on the Venezuelan side, commenting that my accounts "affirmed many of my own observations and experiences with the Karina. You also raised one of the central questions that was passing through my mind while being with the Karina, that is this peculiar conjuncture of complete social breakdown at one side and the resiliency of pervasive ethnicity at the other. Of course, what also struck me, equally as you, is the fact that there exist such radically different worlds within a mere couple of kilometers." (Personal communication, 1998.)

intensified and, in this most recent period, been marked by the transformation of the landscape by forestry activities. Yet the Karinya survived the gold rush at the end of the last century. They may well outlast the present crop of carpetbaggers.

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